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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 006368

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ROUNDUP: LABWANI UPDATE; MALEH TRIAL CONTINUES; OPPOSITION FIGURE FACES MILITARY CHARGES; AUTHORITIES PREVENT ATASSI FORUM MEETING

REF: DAMASCUS 005866

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: The SARG pressure on human rights activists continues unabated, with authorities using detention, legal cases and police intimidation as tools. Kamal Labwani remains detained in Aadra prison, while the presiding judge continues his investigation. The military court trial of Haithem al-Maleh convened for a brief session in early December and was adjourned until 2006. In the meantime, fellow Damascus Declaration signatory and opposition figure Hassan Abdul Azim was informed of security charges against him and will appear in court later in December. SARG authorities prevented the Atassi Forum from meeting on December 4, for the fourth time in five months. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) LABWANI DETENTION ENTERS 4TH WEEK: Kamal Labwani remains detained in a criminal section of Aadra Prison. Labwani's family noted to Poloff and visiting NEA Senior Advisor David Denehy that he has now "purchased" a bed in prison by paying a fellow inmate 1000 Syrian pounds and feels relatively comfortable in his surroundings. Prison officials continue to deny him access to the prison library. Defense lawyer Anwar al-Bunni told Poloff in a separate interview that he has filed a number of motions for another hearing but has yet to receive a trial date from the prosecuting lawyer. "This case started with a phone call and will end with a phone call", said Bunni, alluding to the political nature of the charges, which he feels can only be resolved by the SARG leadership's direct intervention in the case, as no evidence against Labwani has been presented.

3. (C) MALEH CASE CONTINUES: Human rights lawyer Haithem Maleh appeared in the Damascus Military Court on December 1. Maleh, who is facing charges of slandering a variety of government bodies (reftel), submitted a request for any charges based on military law to be dropped. The presiding judge has taken the motion under advisement; the next court date is set for January 19. Maleh continues to hope to be included in an expected presidential pardon for political prisoners in commemoration of Eid al-Adha, which will take place in mid-January. (NOTE: Maleh has not been detained and continues with his human rights work)

4. (C) ANOTHER DAMASCUS DECLARATION SIGNATORY FACES LEGAL TROUBLE: Opposition figure and activist Hassan Abdul Azim, head of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union, spokesman for the National Democratic Front, and Damascus Declaration signatory, has been served with a summons to appear in military court in mid-December. Human rights activists Bunni and Rezan Zeituneh noted that the charges are in connection with the August arrest of Hasan Zeino at a Hama bus station while he was carrying copies of the National Democratic Front's newspaper. Zeino was released on bail on August 24 and awaits a final criminal court verdict on charges of possession of publications of a prohibited organization.

5. (C) ATASSI FORUM PREVENTED FROM MEETING: Following a month-long hiatus due to the Eid al-Fitr holiday, about 40 people were prevented from attending a meeting of the Atassi Forum on December 4. Bunni, who observed the proceedings from a safe distance, noted that police officers and cars had sealed off the area around the building where the meeting was to take place. Police officers conducted brief interviews with persons attempting to near the building, conducted pat-downs, seized papers and documents carried by the would-be attendees, and noted the identification card numbers of those questioned.

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